

Three ways CFOs can lead in the age of agentic AI

With the potential to free your teams from complex, repetitive tasks so they can unleash their strategic and creative value, agentic AI can bring powerful efficiencies to modern business. Based on new research and interviews with CFOs across Australia and New Zealand conducted by ADAPT, discover three ways you can do AI right.



What is agentic AI and how can it lift economic and business productivity?

When it comes to AI, you're probably already familiar with predictive and generative types. But where predictive AI can spot patterns and generative AI can create content when prompted, agentic AI can take actions on its own. An agent can sense what is happening, analyse it, make decisions and act across your workflows, all without needing you to direct every step of the way.

In finance, that could be an agent monitoring your accounts payable in real time. Your agent spots an anomaly, initiates a fix and maintains a complete audit trail of what it did and why.

If that sounds a bit like traditional automation, here's the difference: agentic AI can understand and adapt when conditions change, rather than constantly requiring new rules.

At its heart, agentic AI is a productivity tool — and a powerful one. It lets finance teams do more with less, which is crucial when talent is tight and budgets are tighter. For CFOs, the appeal of agentic AI is clear: less manual grunt work, faster decisions and the ability to free up your team for more strategic, creative and value-driven work.

But the risks are stark, too. Without proper governance and trust, autonomous workflows could expose finance functions to new vulnerabilities. This is why most CFOs are still in the 'awareness' phase. ADAPT's surveys found that 77% of Australian CFOs haven't seen sustainable value from AI, and a staggering 40% of technology deployed across enterprises is sitting unused. That's a lot of cost without much return.

A successful journey to agentic maturity requires careful planning. We have outlined three key steps in this eBook, from ensuring data readiness to putting the right governance frameworks in place, and ultimately driving major cultural change.



What's the loop got to do with it?

Originating from military decision-making control cycles, 'the loop' is how we talk about where humans fit in with the technologies we use. Agentic AI has the ability to make its own decisions, making 'on the loop' governance possible for the first time.

The sweet spot for agentic AI



Human in the loop

The AI makes recommendations, but a human must review and approve before action is taken.

Role of human: Active decision-maker who cannot be bypassed

When used: High-stakes or highly regulated processes where accountability and judgment are critical

Example in finance: An AI fraud detection system flags a suspicious \$2M transfer. A compliance officer must review and decide whether to block or approve

Human on the loop

The AI acts autonomously, but a human monitors, oversees and can intervene if necessary.

Role of human: Supervisor who does not need to approve each individual decision

When used: Time-sensitive or high volume processes where humans cannot check everything manually, but oversight is still important

Example in finance: A cashflow AI autonomously forecasts liquidity needs and initiates transfers between accounts. Humans oversee the process and step in during anomalies

Human out of the loop

The AI operates fully autonomously, with no human approval or real-time oversight

Role of human: Minimal or none – humans only set objectives and parameters up front

When used: Low-stakes, low-risk, or ultra-high-speed processes where intervention is impractical

Example in finance: A customer service chatbot that can autonomously resolve a routine banking query without escalation



In-the-loop requires training, but only 6% of organisations have mandated AI awareness training for staff

CFOs foresee few opportunities here: just 4% of leaders see fully autonomous decision-making in their future

Scale from a solid foundation

Getting started with AI can be daunting. The ‘fail fast’ approach of AI is at odds with compliance-driven finance culture. But persisting with fragmented, legacy systems carries its own risks. That’s why a unified data foundation is a great place to start. It provides a safer way to explore agentic AI, especially when starting with simple rule-based tasks like accounts payable or reconciliations.

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AI is only as good as the information we feed it; integrity matters — especially segregation of duties. Get your house clean before you move or you’re just shifting garbage. Our CEO has challenged each department to one or two AI advancements in the next six months; start small. Engineers dive straight in; finance is like, ‘oh God, here we go’.

– CFO of a fintech company in Australia

Getting your house in order

No CFO wants to expose their teams to technologies that may fail repeatedly before delivering value. This attitude is especially common in Australia, where finance leaders tend to be more skeptical than their global peers.

However, there can be a cost to this skepticism. ADAPT’s research could not find a single CFO who reported that it was “very easy” to model future scenarios with their current data. Essentially, if your systems don’t talk to

each other and your data isn’t accessible, even good technology can’t deliver value.

The quality of your agentic AI will be strongly correlated to how well your data is integrated, governed and accessible. In fact, success with AI is 13 times more likely when data is properly integrated, 4.5 times more likely when quality is high, and 3.6 times more likely when data is democratised and accessible.

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Scale from a solid foundation

Navigating the timeline problem

Organisations with modern unified platforms have a clean data foundation that gives them the power to test agentic AI in carefully controlled environments. However, migrating from legacy ERP to cloud systems can take years, and even after that, you'll typically need another two years of clean transactional data before AI can really deliver value.

That means for many finance leaders, the true payoff from AI is three to five years from now. For Australian and New Zealand organisations, ADAPT's analysis predicts the delay could stretch to eight years compared to peers in the US or Europe. Getting to grips with your data now means finance can deliver a safe and sustainable transformation from day one — no waiting periods, no lengthy data cleanup projects, no cobbling together information from disparate systems.

Picking the right places to get started

Begin with straightforward, low-risk scenarios where agentic AI can prove itself quickly. Think accounts payable and receivable, reconciliations, or compliance checks — workflows that are highly rules-based, can produce auditable outputs, and operate within well-understood guardrails.

These are ideal testing grounds because agentic AI can deliver more than assistance: it can detect anomalies, trigger corrective actions and complete transactions almost on its own, while providing full transparency to finance leaders.

On average, CFOs believe

40%

of technology deployed across their enterprises is not actively used

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Strengthen through governance

For CFOs, the real challenge with agentic AI isn't whether it works, it's whether it can be trusted, explained and justified to the board. That's why strong governance is key. Without it, agentic AI could remain stuck in pilot stages and fail to deliver real business value.

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We track nearly every stage of a mortgage application. What used to take 3 or 4 days can now take half an hour with bots. That's a clear KPI we can measure.

– CFO of a BFSI firm in Australia

The bridge from experimentation to scale

Many CFOs reported how high-profile breaches have shaken confidence across the industry, especially in aviation, superannuation and telecommunications. Pair that with the fact that more than 80% of CFOs struggle to track ROI from digital projects and it's clear: finance leaders want to be sure they are making the right decisions when it comes to AI. That's where governance becomes critical. Without a transparent framework linking AI to measurable outcomes, the benefits won't land with stakeholders.

This means embedding auditability and explainability into every workflow. It means partnering with vendors who are transparent about their AI principles, keeping humans 'in the loop' or 'on the loop' where it matters. When everything runs through a unified platform with consistent data standards, you can trace decisions, explain outcomes, and defend your processes to regulators, auditors and the board.

2

Strengthen through governance

Defining success beyond efficiency

This is also the time to rethink how you measure success. Efficiency is important, but you should also be looking at whether AI is improving your forecast accuracy, cycle times and working capital. ROI must be framed in financial outcomes that can be defended at the board table. Plus, by extending your FinOps approach to cover AI costs, you'll be able to keep spending in check while building trust in these early projects.

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The return on investment would be more time for [the] crew to master their craft [and] become stronger business partners. I'd love for AI to take the balance sheet, reconcile it the way we do and then provide the movement, the bridge... The days and the man hours it would actually save would be astronomical.

– CFO of a fintech company in Australia

The next 2-3 years: Expanding autonomy and reshaping roles

As you build confidence in agentic workflows, you can start pushing into more complex territory like forecasting and fraud detection. These areas require speed, adaptability and continuous learning, but they also demand solid oversight. This is where on-the-loop models work well: your AI agents take actions but flag exceptions for human review.

At the same time, finance roles will naturally begin to evolve. Your managers will focus on orchestrating outcomes across both human and digital teams, while analysts spend their time interpreting and contextualising what the AI is telling you.

Embedding trust mechanisms will be crucial. Explainability, audit trails and ethical guardrails need to be standard features built into every deployment from day one.

On this horizon, goal-based autonomy becomes plausible for selected workflows, while utility-style optimisation in finance will likely take much longer to achieve.

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Shape culture change

It's clear that finance leaders want humans to play a central role when it comes to working with AI, but just 6% of organisations have mandated awareness training for staff. Even though most CFOs envision AI as a support layer over which their teams retain oversight, it is critical to actively support those teams to understand, use and trust AI in the first place.



Despite ranking efficiency, enablement and accuracy as the most important measures of AI success, CFOs report **that the top priority is workforce empowerment.**

Putting confident humans in the loop

Low returns from AI aren't just a technology problem – they're a talent and culture problem. Finance teams have operated in much the same way for decades, with deeply ingrained processes and natural skepticism toward change. For many CFOs, that means the real challenge is convincing people to change behaviours they've relied on for their entire careers.

Fortunately, CFOs are uniquely positioned to demonstrate tech leadership. By modelling trust in agentic AI, setting clear expectations for how it is used and, most importantly, by reskilling your staff, you can embrace your dual role as a leader of cultural change alongside governance.

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Shape culture change

Putting ethics at the heart

Finance leaders must ensure any AI deployment — whether predictive, generative or agentic — is transparent, auditable and compliant. A human on-the-loop approach is essential here: you want to empower AI to act and make decisions, but you need to retain ultimate control.

This means setting clear boundaries around what AI can do autonomously and what needs human review. Getting this balance right builds trust with your team and your board. It shows you are leveraging agentic AI responsibly while maintaining the governance standards on which finance is built.

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Our IT division has been running AI bootcamps across the organisation... developing use cases for Copilot that we can bring back into the business and add value. I've started to focus on a more diverse mix in my team — I brought in someone with a data focus, and people with storytelling capability. So, we can move away from just recording transactions.

— CFO of a leading tax and consulting services firm in Australia

The next 3–5 years: Going truly agentic

Over time, your finance functions can mature into something truly transformative — a fully agentic environment where AI agents autonomously handle compliance, adjust forecasts in real-time and suggest strategic moves — all while you maintain oversight.

This is a fundamental shift in what it means to lead finance: you'll move from approving transactions to shaping outcomes, from ticking compliance boxes to steering real enterprise value creation.

However, this long-term vision only happens if you start preparing now. Every delay in modernising your ERP systems, getting your data architecture and governance in order and reskilling your teams pushes you further behind. CFOs who hesitate may find themselves nearly a decade behind their global peers — a gap that's incredibly hard to close.

Lighten the AI load with Workday Illuminate

The transformative benefits of AI are clear, but so are the challenges of safely and effectively implementing it. Finance leaders must anchor adoption in trusted finance data, elevate the role of human skills, and leverage platforms designed for resilience and adaptability — it's a lot to navigate.

Workday Illuminate makes it simple. With our focus on finance, trusted data and governed innovation, we can guide your AI journey — empowering CFOs to capture near-term value from pragmatic use cases while building the foundations for agentic finance at scale.

Workday Illuminate is the next generation of Workday AI, designed to automate routine tasks and continuously detect anomalies in an evolving landscape. Make confident decisions backed by data with explainable AI-driven insights that forecast, predict and recommend with clarity. Move beyond narrow, task-oriented AI uses to a world where your people collaborate seamlessly with AI, and you can drive truly transformational outcomes that demonstrate ROI. That's because Workday Illuminate is more than an assisted user experience. It's an anticipated user experience.

When you partner with Workday, you can rely on thoughtful solutions that are built within an ethical AI framework. Illuminate is based on one of the world's largest clean HR and finance data sets. And because it always keeps a human in the loop, you can maintain trust, security, compliance and control.

[Get started today](#)





A The research, data, and insights presented in this eBook were provided by ADAPT, a specialist research and advisory firm.

About ADAPT

ADAPT is a specialist Research & Advisory firm providing local market insights and benchmarking data to Australia and New Zealand's senior technology and business community.

Since 2011, through our proprietary surveys, we have empowered the region's top enterprise and government leaders to make informed strategic decisions and extract greater value from their technology investments.

Combined with our industry-leading conferences, private roundtables, and custom research projects, ADAPT equips organisations with the evidence, connections, and tools they need to stay at the forefront of modern trends and build for the future.

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